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SUBJECT: SAAKASHVILI STRONG IN ZUGDIDI DISTRICT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Mikheil Saakashvili is strong in Samegrelo and its capital, Zugdidi, the home of many displaced persons from the conflict in Abkhazia. His National Movement is well-organized, well-funded and has many campaign volunteers.

As a result, he is likely to gather a majority of the district's voters, of whom 76,000 are expected to go to the polls. By contrast, the opposition seems focused on complaints about the voters' list and harassment by police and/or National Movement supporters. However, despite their insistence about the unfairness of "dead souls" on the voters list, they do not explain clearly how such names would be translated into votes in the ballot box. They are far less active in seeking votes door to door than Saakashvili's supporters. They have not sought the free time available to them on the local TV station. While Embassy officers were in Zugdidi, Saakashvili was able to turn many local citizens out for a concert held in a driving rain. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Zugdidi is the largest city in Samegrelo/Zemo Svaneti region and an important agricultural services center for Western Georgia. It is also the home of a majority of the displaced persons from the conflict in Abkhazia. On December 17-18, Econoff and two Embassy LES employees visited the city to learn more about the status of the Georgian presidential campaign. They learned that Saakashvili demonstrates substantial strength in the district, which has about 120,000 voters in the city and surrounding villages, divided into 104 precincts/polling places. The opposition in Zugdidi seems poorly organized and more focused on complaints about the voters' list, access to media, and alleged intimidation by police and Saakashvili supporters than on "retail politics" and getting out the vote. By contrast, the Saakashvili campaign is well-organized, with a top layer of Tbilisi-based campaign directors and paid workers, who supervise numerous volunteers. According to the Zugdidi National Movement campaign chairman, Lasha Damenia, there is one volunteer for every 100 voters in the district. These volunteers actively encourage their assigned group to vote for Saakashvili. Posters for Saakashvili are everywhere, even plastered on a Coca-Cola delivery truck. Nothing similar for the other candidates was visible away from their campaign headquarters.

THE GAMGEBELI

¶3. (SBU) On November 17, we met with Aleksander Kobalia, Gamgebeli (governor) of Zugdidi district, and a member of Saakashvili's National Movement. Kobalia said that National Movement polls are showing Saakashvili with 82 percent support in the Zugdidi district. He attributes the high level of support to the Saakashvili government's success in bringing 24 hour electricity supply and resurfacing of roads to the region. It is likely also a result of the Saakashvili

administration's strong support to the IDP population which lives here and also in the Gali district of Abkhazia. Kobalia's father is an influential businessman in Zugdidi and owner of the local television station, Odishi. The opposition points to this fact as support for its allegations that it cannot get time on the station.

THE DISTRICT ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIR

14. (SBU) We also met with Nana Okujava, Chair of the Zugdidi District Election Commission. She said she was engaged in making corrections to the voters' list, which has been a key complaint by the opposition in the district. However, she said that she had had no face to face discussions with opposition representatives since the elections were announced. Okujava agreed with Kobalia that Saakashvili's strength derives from infrastructure improvements. However, she added that many Zugdidi residents believe that Saakashvili is the only hope for solving the problem of reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgia. Zugdidi was the site of a protest organized by the opposition prior to the major demonstration on November 2. Okujava said that more people came from Tbilisi to participate in the Zugdidi demonstration than from Zugdidi itself. A special problem in Zugdidi is registering and accounting for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia. Many of these people live in Gali, in Abkhazia, and come to Zugdidi to vote. Estimates of their number we heard in Zugdidi ranged from 33,000 to 54,000.

GAMKRELIDZE'S SUPPORTERS

15. (SBU) Bachuki Kardava is the chair of the National Democratic Party, and lives in Tbilisi. His party is allied with Davit Gamkrelidze's New Rights party. Kardava is

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heading the Gamkrelidze campaign out of a comfortable house in Zugdidi. He said that the New Rightists believe they can pick up a significant number of votes in Samegrelo. Gamkrelidze plans to visit Zugdidi soon. Kardava accused the local government of dominating the political process in Zugdidi and intimidating voters, making it hard to find people to campaign for the opposition. In particular, he complained that he had recruited people to represent New Rights on Precinct Election Commissions, but that they had quit after feeling pressured by the National Movement. He added that he will submit his list of pollwatchers as late as possible to ensure they do not receive undue attention from the authorities. Kardava sounded a recurring theme by claiming that there are lots of "dead souls" on the voters' list. Because the election was called on short notice, there was little time to improve the list, he said. On the other hand, he said his campaign headquarters had not been subjected to harassment and he had no problem with getting the media to cover his campaign events. He has talked on the telephone with Okujava at the DEC. Like his candidate Gamkrelidze, Kardava suspects the other opposition parties are (wrongly) preparing themselves more for January 6, the day after the election, than for the January 5 election itself. Kardava said that he will be vigilant at the polls to prevent falsification of the vote protocols and to watch for evidence of "carousel voting". Any result that gives Saakashvili more than 70 percent of the vote will be fraudulent, he added.

GACHECHILADZE'S SUPPORTERS

16. (SBU) We then met with the United Council of the Opposition, whose candidate is Levan Gachechiladze, the regional coordinator for the Tavesupleba (Freedom) Party was Tengiz Gergedava, from Tbilisi. About seven or eight other local party workers participated in the meeting. Gergedava said that one major reason for disenchantment with

Saakashvili is politicization of the military and police, and the lack of checks and balances on police power. One of the party workers complained specifically about being arrested "for no reason" in 2005. Other complaints focused on the period before the November 2 Tbilisi demonstrations, with participants in the October Zugdidi rally allegedly receiving anonymous telephone threats. Light punishments of National Movement supporters who tried to break up the rally received criticism. Regarding the election campaign, the party workers said that they cannot rent space on billboards because the billboard owners are afraid. Saakashvili posters are ubiquitous now in Zugdidi. They also complained about two instances of police contacts with opposition supporters that engendered fear. A worker from Poti was especially bitter, saying that the police there are controlling and monitoring people who visit the party office, and that the party flag was knocked off the roof of the building. (Note: at no time did we notice any police presence anywhere near the party offices we visited in Zugdidi.) Gergedava was concerned about the voters' list, as was Kardava. He also alleged that in Zugdidi, the National Movement is putting people on the Precinct Election Commissions who are pretending to be New Rights or Labor representatives.

17. (SBU) Asked what they are doing to campaign, the workers said that people do go door to door to seek votes, and they hold meetings to which supporters can come. Gachechiladze is getting his fair share of free television and radio time on national TV and radio, they said. However, they have not requested any free time on the local TV station, Odishi, because they believe any such request is useless, given that it is controlled by the Governor and his family. They have requested and received time on local radio. Gachechiladze is coming to Zugdidi on December 26, they said. The Poti representative claimed that 4000 people saw Gachechiladze when he came to Poti on December 9, but the event was ignored by the national media.

18. (SBU) Gergedava was cagey about the opposition's plans for after the elections. He claimed that it is Saakashvili who is making up the idea that the opposition will not accept the results of the polls and will return to the streets. However, he feels that the elections are being subverted in the pre-election period and the international election monitors are focused on election day. The opposition will review the reports by the election monitors "with care", he said.

LOCAL TELEVISION

19. (SBU) Gocha Minjoria, the director of the local Odishi TV
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station, told us that the opposition parties prefer to spend their money on national TV stations rather than on local TV. Only the National Movement is spending money on local advertising, he said. Therefore the National Movement is not using its free time on the station. Moreover, he said, the opposition parties have not claimed the free time to which they are entitled. They have called regarding how to get time, but have not followed up. The station has 8 journalists who are covering all the parties equally, he said. The station has a grant to hold a debate on December 28 and is inviting the local representatives of the candidates to participate.

SAAKASHVILI'S SUPPORTERS

10. (SBU) The weather in Zugdidi on December 17 was cold and steadily raining. Nevertheless, many people turned out for a concert in support of Saakashvili. Saakashvili's Dutch-born wife, Sandra Roloefs, won praise for her singing of a traditional Mingrelian folk song, watched over by a beaming Saakashvili. Even though the onlookers were bussed in by the

National Movement from surrounding villages, the turnout was impressive given the weather, which was truly atrocious. On December 18, the National Movement coordinator, Lasha Damenia, told us that 8000 people had come to the concert. The town was certainly jammed with traffic the evening of the concert, even if that figure was exaggerated, as is often the case in Georgia. Damenia stressed that the opposition parties are very inactive. The National Movement, he said, tries to focus on local problems people may be having, responding to letters complaining about such things as unpaved streets. He showed us the letter Saakashvili has sent to senior citizens promising to raise pensions if he is elected. Saakashvili has visited Zugdidi three times since the election was announced, and will visit two more times before January 5. No opposition candidate has yet appeared personally in Zugdidi.

¶11. (SBU) Damenia responded to concerns about the voter lists. While the United Opposition claimed that 30,000 of the 120,000 names on the list are erroneous, Damenia estimated that it is really no more than 2000 or so. He dismissed the idea of carousel voting as very difficult, given the presence of TV cameras in the polling places focused on the ballot box and registration table, as well as other safeguards. Although he knows what "carousel voting" is, he said it is as a practical matter all but impossible to organize effectively. He estimates that of the 120,000 or so registered voters, 76,000 will vote on January 5 in Zugdidi, and of those, 56,000 will vote for Saakashvili. He bases his estimates on the very active work of the National Movement volunteers. These campaigners visit each of the 100 voters they are responsible for and determine their preferences. For those voters who lean to candidates other than Saakashvili, he said, the volunteers try to find relatives or respected friends who support Saakashvili and will try to persuade them to change their votes.

NATELASHVILI AND PATARKATSISHVILI

¶12. (SBU) We found Shalva Natelashvili's Labor Party headquarters in the city center, but its entrance was quite hard to find and there was only a caretaker present who could tell us nothing about his campaign in Zugdidi. We saw nothing of Badri Patarkatshishvili's campaign, although we heard from several people who told us he was paying 200 lari to individuals to work the polls for him.

TEFFT